

A STUDENT RETENTION STRATEGY FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS AT THAI PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: Factors affecting student retention were examined in the context of international programs at Thai private higher education institutions for the development of a leadership strategy to affect retention. A mixed-methods study involving both quantitative and qualitative aspects was employed to determine factors affecting student retention and current practices utilized. Students, faculty and administrators of international programs were surveyed and interviewed to obtain data for this study. Results indicated that retention of students in international programs at Thai private universities were influenced by academic, social, advising, and financial issues as well as levels of degree commitment, scholastic conscientiousness and academic efficacy. Current practices utilized included academic remediation, tutoring, advising, and student monitoring systems. These findings suggest that implementation of practical interventions supported by retention research and leadership commitment to increasing academic improvement will benefit students and have an impact on student retention.

Keywords: Student Retention, International Programs, Leadership Strategy

Introduction

Student retention is an issue of global concern for higher education institutions everywhere. The increasing participation of students who cross borders to attend universities around the world, increasing student diversity, the need for standardized educational quality, and accountability of higher education providers increases the necessity to address this issue. The need to build strong relationships with their students is particularly important for tuition-driven institutions that strive to keep these students in good academic standing, while at the same time balancing the financial viability of their programs or schools.

Thailand's higher education system has undergone significant change in the last two decades in order to meet the demands of the modern global society. Thai higher education institutions have attempted to expand and redefine their roles as education providers by emphasizing English proficiency and the offering of

international programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Sinhaneti, 2009). In Thailand, the term "international programs" is synonymous with programs taught using English as the medium of instruction. Individual universities are placing greater emphasis on international programs as they are becoming an integral part of the university's supplemental source of tuition income.

Despite the increase in foreign nationals studying in international programs in Thailand, the majority of the students enrolled in these programs are Thai. Thai students may experience difficulty in adjusting to a university program where English is the medium of instruction as in the past, they have not particularly shown a high level of proficiency in English and other subjects. Official results from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development show that according to PISA scores, Thai students are statistically significantly below the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science (OECD, 2009). This limitation may have an effect on the students' academic achievement and consequently their academic integration during their first year in college and thus consequently, have an effect on persistence. Thus, research is needed to identify those factors that influence student attrition in order to assist institutions in developing effective retention practices that will benefit all stakeholders and contribute to an enhancement of the overall quality and standards in international programs.

Theories of Student Retention

Various theories of student retention exist, but the most well-known theory belongs to Vincent Tinto, whose Theory of Student Departure has been the focus of many subsequent studies on retention and so often cited that it has attained paradigmatic status (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Tinto (1993) stated that colleges are made up of both academic and social systems. Academic systems are concerned with the formal education of students and involve activities that center around classrooms, laboratories and faculty. The social system of the college has to do with the daily life and personal needs of members of the institution. These comprise interactions among the students, faculty and staff. The better these students are able to integrate into these systems, the more likely they will persist in college. Pre-entry characteristics, the students' level of commitment to graduation and the institution also influence persistence. Thus, the student's perception of his or her match with the attitudes, values, beliefs, and norms of the college community influence their decision to leave or to stay. Tinto's theory has provided the framework for many studies in the area of student retention (Liu & Liu, 2000;

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Braxton, Millem, & Sullivan, 2000; Reason, 2003; Metz, 2004; Grice & Grice, 2007). These studies have included testing the validity of the theory and its application for different groups of students.

Alexander Astin's Theory of Student Involvement, proposed in 1985, also provides an additional understanding the issue of student retention. Although Astin acknowledged that there were many factors that affected retention in college, he recognized that two predictive categories of factors, namely personal and environmental played a role in retention (Seidman, 2012). Personal factors included: academic background, family background, educational aspirations, and study habits, expectations about college, age and marital status. Environmental aspects included residence, employment, academic environment and characteristics of the college. Behavioral constructs from Astin's theory have been used to further specify aspects of Tinto's model (Berger & Millem 1997). As Tinto himself has stated, student involvement in the life of the college, especially academic involvement, is how students become engaged. The more students become involved academically and socially, the more they become involved in their own learning and the more students learn, the more they persist (Tinto, 1993).

Research Design

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods methodology and the use of data triangulation as a means of gaining insight into the issue of student retention. Three methods were utilized to gather data for this study: a student survey, faculty survey and administrator interview. Quantitative data analysis was used to analyze data from the student survey while qualitative data analysis was used to analyze data from the faculty survey and administrator interview.

Research Instruments

An adapted version of the College Persistence Questionnaire provided the basis of the student survey. The College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) is a survey instrument designed to identify students who are at risk for dropping out, reasons why they drop out, and variables that distinguish students who persist and those who do not (Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009). The CPQ contains a list of variables that have been associated with retention in past studies including: academic integration, social integration, advising effectiveness, academic motivation, academic efficacy, financial strain, collegiate stress, degree commitment, scholastic conscientiousness and institutional commitment. A faculty survey was used to obtain information from faculty regarding faculty perceptions of issues related to student retention and current practices. Finally, an interview with administrators was carried out to determine current practices involving retention in international programs.

Participants

A total of 2,842 students studying in international programs from six private universities in Thailand were surveyed, along with 42 full-time faculty and three program directors.

Findings

A standard multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between Institutional Commitment (IC) and nine constructs related to student retention (Academic Integration, AI; Social Integration, SI; Advising Effectiveness, A; Academic Efficacy, AE; Degree Commitment, DC; Financial Strain, FS; and Scholastic Conscientiousness, SC). The multiple regression model with all nine predictors produced the following results: a multiple correlation coefficient of .479, $R^2 = .229$, $F(9, 2164) = 71.560$, $p < 0.05$. The results indicate that approximately 23% of the variance in IC can be accounted for by the combination of the seven constructs (AI, SI, A, AE, DC, FS, and SC). Two of the constructs (AM and CS) were not significant at the .05 probability level. Additionally, four out of six constructs (A, DC, FS, and SC) were significant at $p < .001$ level. Statistical analysis carried out to determine if Institutional Commitment was influenced by students' high school GPA, first-generation student status and parents' educational level did not yield significant results.

Data from the faculty survey and administrator interviews were coded into meaningful analytic units to yield information regarding current practices related to retention utilized in international programs. The following practices were observed: use of computerized early warning systems to identify students who were academically at risk; remedial courses in English and mathematics; tutoring by faculty members, advising by faculty members; use of interventions involving personal contact by faculty and administrators. Findings indicated that problems related with systematic and consistent interventions as well as evaluations of effectiveness were problems faced by administrators of international programs.

Discussion

According to the multiple regression analysis, a moderate, but significant relationship was found between the construct of Institutional Commitment (representing retention) and seven of the other constructs. Findings revealed that students' decisions to stay at their universities were influenced by their academic and social integration, the quality and effectiveness of advising they received, how they felt about their academic abilities, how committed they were to getting a degree, how responsible they were about their schoolwork, and financial concerns. Findings from the faculty surveys and administrator interviews revealed that common practices at these international programs included: tutoring, advising, remedial courses in English and other subjects. However, they were available per request by individual

students and not offered systematically. Monitoring systems, used to alert faculty of students at academic risk, were available, but not optimally and constantly utilized by faculty. Help was available to students individually, but not through formal processes. Both faculty and administrators' findings revealed a lack of consistent provision and utilization of academic and advising resources. This in turn, pointed to a weakness in addressing students' needs in these academic areas. In addition, faculty and administrators also perceived that academic concerns were the major problem why students would leave the international program. Thus, a proposed strategy for student retention must address these issues highlighted by the findings.

The initial proposed strategy to address these issues and encourage retention for students in international programs at Thai private universities is composed of five areas and a central underlying philosophy of shared leadership (transformational leadership) and a commitment to student success by all parties involved. The following figure represents the proposed strategy:

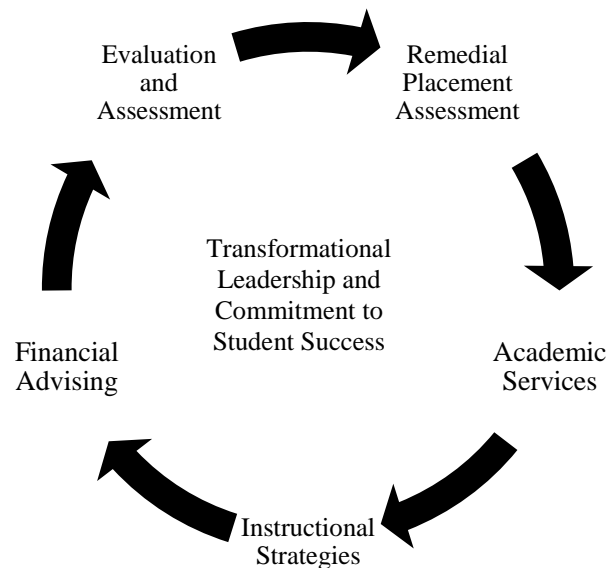


Figure 1: Strategy for Student Retention in International Programs

Component One: Remedial Placement Assessment

Liberal admissions policies characterize many of the admissions practices of international programs. Nonetheless, the use of admissions testing, although regularly utilized, is in many instances, only a formality. Admissions testing for the international program should determine the level of proficiency of students, not only in reading and writing skills in English, but also in mathematics. This in turn, determines which courses the students have to take before they can be integrated into the program. A well-designed placement assessment, not only accurately assesses students' skills and matches them to the courses they need, it also ensures consistent standards (Collins, 2008).

Component Two: Academic Services

Component two of the strategy to improve student retention is comprised of two areas for implementation: advising and a comprehensive learning center.

Advising. - Faculty advising is one of the most commonly used methods of advising by higher education institutions (Fusch, 2012). According to the findings of this study, faculty advising was also commonly used in the international programs surveyed and the majority of faculty stated that they had advising duties. However, findings suggest that advisory duties were offered in an informal, non-systematic way. Students were expected to approach faculty members in case they had problems or questions. Research shows that advising is especially important to freshmen because new students are less familiar with college and need more guidance and support. They also need more follow-up sessions and positive reinforcement from their advisors (Lau, 2003). Thus, the strategy here is how to emphasize effective and proactive advising to reach the students who need it most.

Comprehensive Learning Centers. - First-year

students who are academically and developmentally unprepared are identified as being at risk for dropping out. They may be unfamiliar with university procedures, have not yet made close relationships with peers or faculty, and overall, reluctant to seek out help. Tutoring is one method that may be able to help them not only become more academically competent, but also a means to establish social and academic integration within the institution. The positive impact of tutoring was found when comparing the withdrawal rates of tutored and non-tutored students. Tutoring was shown to increase the students' academic performance and enhance their academic and social integration (Rheinheimer & McKenzie, 2011; Rheinheimer, et.al. 2010).

Component Three: Instructional Strategies

Faculty actions play an important part in increasing student retention. The nature and frequency of their contact with students has a great potential to not only monitor students who are at risk, but to advise and intervene in situations where students are having problems. Along the same vein, the nature and frequency of faculty contact also has the potential to be a contributor to the problems of students, albeit unknowingly. Tinto states that although faculty action is critical to institutional efforts to increase student retention, in most instances, faculty at the university level are not knowledgeable about teaching pedagogies or experienced about retention issues. In many instances, the least experienced faculty or even adjunct faculties are assigned to teach first year courses, which is the critical period of adjustment for students (Tinto, 2006). This study recommends the following instructional strategies: improving classroom practice, learning communities, freshmen seminars, and supplemental instruction.

Improving Classroom Practice. - Faculty can be considered on the front line when it comes to contact with students. Faculty can help students increase their learning through the use of methods that have been shown to improve learning such as use of computer technology in teaching, collaborative learning techniques, and just by having an overall mindset to emphasize teaching and learning (Lau, 2003). Some strategies for improving classroom practice that faculty should be aware of include: being enthusiastic and personable, getting to know the students, good communication and feedback, letting the students know you care about them and their learning, prompt feedback about work submitted, quick identification of students who are academically at risk, urge students to come to office hours, and working with other faculty and staff to develop shared expectations that can be communicated to students (Saret, 2007).

Learning Communities. - Of the various methods of increasing student retention that involve the effects of pedagogy and classroom practice, learning communities has been the most researched and been proven to enhance student retention (Tinto, 2006). Learning communities are defined as a method of linking several courses together and allowing students to take these courses together as a 'block'. By doing so, students get to increase their social integration as they have courses with the same students, have the opportunity for a deeper understanding of the course, have more interaction with one another and their teachers. As for faculty, the integration or cooperation among instructors for their courses increases students' academic performance as these skills are intertwined throughout the courses (Price, 2005).

Freshman Seminars. - Freshman seminars are small-sized courses developed for first-year students that are designed to provide opportunities for close interaction with faculty, while at the same time introducing students to topics of interest in a particular major or acting like an extended orientation where students are taught study

skills and other skills that they need for college. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), freshman seminars have consistently been used effectively to increase persistence and degree completion. More research has been carried out on the efficacy of freshman seminars than any other course in higher education. Research findings have linked freshman seminars to improved academic achievement, retention, instructional development of faculty, enhancing institutional awareness of student issues, promoting student satisfaction with the institution, and increasing students' use of campus support services (Cuseo, 2010).

Supplemental Instruction. - The concept of SI involves holding weekly sessions where students get together with an SI leader, who is usually an upper level student who has completed the course, to study and review the coursework. It is usually used with traditionally difficult academic courses. It is not a remedial course and is open to all students taking the course and voluntary. The SI leader helps increase academic effectiveness by using collaborative learning strategies such as group discussions and interaction. It helps students to master the course content while at the same time developing and integrating effective learning and study strategies (Arendale, 1994). The positive benefits of SI have been researched in several studies where the positive effects of this instructional strategy served to increase students' academic effectiveness with the coursework and also receiving positive feedback from the students (Bronstein, 2008; Jarret & Harris, 2009, Moore & LeDee, 2006).

Component Four: Financial Advising

Trends of increasing college tuition rates, rising costs, and growing income inequality are just some of the factors that affect the ability to pay for a college education. Thus, an important strategy for improving retention is to develop a comprehensive approach to addressing the financial needs of students and a proactive approach to identifying internal and external sources of funding for students. This also includes increased communication and spread of information to students about the available scholarships and resources. According to a study by Noelle-Levitz (2011), financial aid and scholarships offered with the objective of increasing student retention is utilized at almost 80% of private four-year colleges and universities in the United States. Over 20% of these institutions report that this retention practice is very effective in lowering the dropout rate.

Component Five: Evaluation and Assessment

This strategy includes evaluation and assessment of students in the international program and evaluation of the strategy and tactics implemented. Monitoring systems are used to alert university personnel about students who are at risk, usually those with low grades or grade point averages. Academic advisors can see this information when students register and take action to limit the number

of credits enrolled or prohibit students from enrolling in certain courses. Nonetheless, monitoring system's effectiveness depends on what those responsible for intervention do with the data that they receive. Those faculty or staff at the university that are assigned advising roles must carry them out consistently. Research has suggested that direct contact with students is an important aspect of retention. Students are more likely to persist in the program if they have been contacted and made aware of their problems and offered solutions or help. The form of contact can be through e-mail, text, social media, or telephone. Advisors or faculty can then give students information on how to access services that can help them or clarify what they need to do to succeed (Kinzie, 2005). As for any program, it is necessary to evaluate and assess the program in order to determine its effectiveness. The purpose of evaluation is to obtain data in order to identify areas that may need improvement and communicate the impact of the program to those involved in order have them assist with improvements and further implementation. Information obtained from evaluation is used to increase coordination, shared responsibility, and accountability for the retention strategies utilized at the university. Effective evaluations should have the following characteristics: be rigorous, efficient, lightweight (less onerous than the implementation of the strategy itself), appropriate, authentic, and consistent (Traxler & Riordan, 2003).

Transformational Leadership and Commitment to Student Success

The underlying philosophy that is tied to the success of this strategy involves a commitment from both administrators and faculty to the goal of improving student retention. Transformational leadership is recommended as it fosters collaboration, a shared purpose, respect of differences, division of labor, and encourages a learning environment. These characteristics enhance change and student learning in higher education (Astin & Astin, 2000). Most reform initiatives rely on high levels of motivation and commitment on the part of faculty or staff in order to solve problems in implementation. Transformational leadership focuses on developing the organization's ability to innovate rather than focusing on direct coordination and control. It builds the organizations to select its purpose and supports the development of changes in the practices of teaching and learning. The leadership is distributed, with those involved having a shared vision and commitment (Hallinger, 2003). The effects of transformational leadership on increasing academic performance, student retention, and student outcomes have been studied in research with positive outcomes (Gill, et. al. 2011; Love, Trammel, & Cartner, 2010; Harrison, 2011).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Student retention is an issue of concern for higher education institutions around the world. The increasing

participation of students who cross borders to attend universities around the world, increasing student diversity, the need for standardized educational quality, and accountability of higher education providers increases the need to address this issue. The need to build strong relationships with their students is particularly important for tuition-driven institutions that strive to keep these students in good academic standing, while at the same time balancing the financial viability of their programs or schools. Consequently, Thai universities face many of the same issues as their counterparts around the world.

Students matriculating in international programs at Thai private higher education institutions are affected by similar factors that affect student retention in western cultures. Although the type and extent of various factors may vary, enough similarity may be assumed to exist to warrant interventions. Academic and social integration, students' backgrounds, involvement in their studies, motivation, commitment, and financial concerns are all potentially influential factors that affect their retention in international programs. Academic factors, including English ability, may be a major mitigating factor that may cause students to drop out from the international program as the majority of students do not have English as their first language.

A strategy for increasing student retention for this group of students was arrived at that has as its purpose, not only the increased retention of students, but also long-term objectives of increasing student learning and academic development in order to increase commitment and collaboration among administrators, staff, and faculty. This has implications for not only the students, but also the financial viability of international programs and institutional reputation. An emphasis on retention has additional benefits of focusing administrative and faculty efforts on a clear objective. Additionally, institutional practices currently being utilized are highlighted in order to compare their effectiveness so that they can be improved or replaced accordingly. An intrinsic component behind the recommended strategy is the necessity for commitment on the part of administrators and faculty in addressing this issue. Consequently, this component highlights the necessity of faculty involvement in the strategy. Thus, it cannot be stressed enough that transformational leadership plays an integral part in fostering a commitment to the goals and objectives of the student retention strategy.

The limitation of this study was the inability to longitudinally follow the students in order to affirm whether or not they were actually retained. However, implications of this study may benefit international programs in that it provides useful data that will help institutions to plan and develop strategies to increase student learning which in the long run can increase regional competitiveness in the education field. With the upcoming integration of ASEAN in 2015, higher education is set to play an important role in supporting the

economic integration. Transnational education and increasing student mobility are set to pave the way for collaboration and integration between universities in the region. These institutions, both public and private, must prioritize the development of international standards and enhancement of their reputations in order to remain competitive (Zhang, 2013). Nonetheless, additional study focusing on the specific issue of language preparedness of students in international programs and the overall academic quality of students upon graduation from these programs is an area that could be researched further in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the needs of this group of students.

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